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The Wise Goodwife

Leigh Ann Hussey

"Gramma, I feel hot."

"Lands, child, on a cool fall day like this? Come here and let me feel of your forehead. Tsk! Feels like fever. Off to bed with you!"

"Gramma, I don't feel good."

"I know, child, I know. I reckon it's time to ask Goody Hawkins to help us."

"Who's Goody Hawkins?"

"Hush, now, try to sleep. I'll come back soon."

"Gramma, where did you go?"

"Out into the woods back of the farm, child."

"Why, Gramma?"

"To get Goody Hawkins' help."

"Who's Goody Hawkins?"

"Well, that's a long story."

"Tell me a story, Gramma."

Well, you know 'bout the pilgrim days, Thanksgiving and all. Those people way back then, that first time, were giving thanks that they'd lived a whole year in a whole new country, without too many of 'em dyin'.

Lotta times you see pictures, drawings, with lots of Indians standin' there to welcome them folks. Well, 'taint so. Weren't nobody there when they got off that boat, not but one Indian, all alone. Hist'ry books say it was him, Squanto, as taught them first folks how to live through one of our winters - ice 'n sleet 'n snow 'n all, not like they had back in

England, where they come from. But that ain't rightly so, neither. Squanto, and a few other friendly Indians as wandered in later, they taught the menfolk. But the women, those days, well, they weren't s'posed to be important, even though they did most o' the work, so we don't hear 'bout them much.

Well, a woman come off'n that boat, not quite yet old as your mamma, and her name was Grace Hawkins, but ever' one called her Goody Hawkins. "Goody" is short for "good wife", and it's like callin' a lady "Missus" today.

Goody Hawkins was young and pretty, though you couldn't tell that very well, 'cause in those days the womenfolk wore long skirts and long sleeves and bonnets to tuck in and hide their hair. So Goody Hawkins had beautiful long brown hair, though you couldn't see it, and skin soft as the skin of a peach. But she had a nice young husband who loved her very much, and he knew how pretty she was.

And Goody Hawkins was one more thing that made her very special: she was a wise woman, who knew plants and herbs and roots and barks to make sick people feel better. They didn't have doctors like we do now, just a lot of men who figured if you were sick your blood was bad and so they'd make you bleed. That got people sicker, more often than not. They thought they were real smart, them old doctors, and maybe they were smart about gettin' money from folks. But they weren't smart 'bout the folks themselves, mostly 'cause they were too busy listening to each other talking 'bout high-falutin' doctor things in big words than listening to the sick bodies of the sick people.

But Goody Hawkins was different. She listened to the people talking 'bout what hurt them, and she felt of their heads and wrists and looked into their eyes and ears and mouths. And sometimes she didn't seem to look at them at all. She just closed her eyes and looked at them with her heart. And then she'd go into big clay pots and little wooden boxes in her house, and pick out just the thing a sick person needed. And do you know how she knew just the right thing, how Goody Hawkins could see with her heart and not just her eyes?

Goody Hawkins was a witch.

No, not like you dress up at Halloween. A real witch, a real wise woman. No warts, no wire hair, remember I told you she was pretty. And no flying broom, neither. She didn't need to fly, 'cause she could see ev'rything.

Well, no, she didn't have a crystal ball. But they way my granny told me, and her granny told her, was that she had a big silver bowl, a real treasure. And she'd pour clear rainwater in that bowl, and look into it in the nighttime, with just a candle for light. And they say she could see miles away, and even years away. Into yesterday, say, or last year, or ten years ago. And sometimes, she could see tomorrow.

A cauldron? Why of course she had a cauldron. Ever'one did, those days, just like we have pots and pans today. But she only had a little one at first-remember, they were poor in them first few years in America, and iron costed a lot of money. Goody Hawkins had just the little cauldron she brought with her from home, only as big as my big soup pot.

What did she boil up in her cauldron? Well, not babies, I can tell you that! It was herbs, mostly, tree bark and roots and such. Anise and coltsfoot, simmered with a little sugar or honey, as good a cough syrup as you can find nowadays, and even better than some. That's a recipe my granny's granny knew, and likely Goody Hawkins as well. Goody Hawkins made ointments from herbs and grease, she made soaps for fleas and lice, she brewed teas, she made mashes for cuts and bad hurts to make them heal clean and fast.

But I haven't told you the best part: Goody Hawkins could do magic. Not like making scarves disappear in her fist or pulling quarters out of your ear. I mean spells, oh yes, and special little bundles of things in little bags to keep in your pocket or put under your pillow. These had herbs in 'em, yes, and besides that she could put in a special rock, maybe, or a little short twig from a certain tree, or a piece of paper with secrets written on it, or any such small thing. You could wear one for good luck, sleep on one to have good dreams.

In the nighttime, often, you could see a light shining in Goody Hawkins' cottage, warm and bright, and if you listened real hard, you might hear words, strong and beautiful, or singing so soft and sweet it might have come out of a fairy hill.

And in the daytime, oh, the smells that came out of that cottage! You could tell what was brewing by the smells of the herbs in the breeze. Rosemary, mint, clove and cinnamon, lemon-leaf, basil, horehound and lavender.

And hanging from the ceiling in one corner of the cottage were always bunches of drying herbs, filling the whole room with spicyness and sweetness. She brought the little boxes special from her home in England, but the rest she got right here, from the meadows and forests.

One day she was in the forest, gathering plants for medicines. Some of the plants were just like at home, she knew them right away. Others she didn't know, and them she would look at, and smell, and taste of-it was right dangerous, that, but weren't no other way to find out about 'em. This spring day, after their first long hard, winter had passed, Goody Hawkins went to pluck a leaf off'n a plant, to taste it.

Suddenly, she heard a crashing in the bushes and a woman's voice crying out to her. She turned around and who should she see but an Indian woman, near her own age, come runnin' toward her, talkin' words she couldn't understand. This Indian woman, she snatched that leaf from Goody Hawkins and shooed her away from that plant quick as she could. The Indian woman pulled out a thin stick, rounded at one end, and waved it so that Goody Hawkins thought the other woman might hit her with it, so she backed up, afraid.

But the Indian woman turned to the plant and commenced to digging it out of the ground with her stick, digging up the roots. The Indian woman pulled off the roots and pushed them into Goody Hawkins' hands, keeping some for herself. She put the roots into a deerskin bag, and 'twas then that Goody Hawkins saw other herbs and things in that bag, and figured out that t'other woman was in the woods for just the same job as herself, namely, getting herbs.

Even though they didn't speak each other's language, by pantomiming and pointing they could understand each other, and Goody Hawkins learned that the leaf she'd been about to eat was deadly poison. But the roots were good eating, roasted or boiled just like a potato. How 'bout that! Plants are funny that way.

Goody Hawkins realized she owed her life to the Indian woman, for warnin' her off'n them leaves. But she didn't know just how to thank her new friend. Still, they spent the rest of the day walkin' in the woods, an' Goody Hawkins learned more about the new world's plants in one day than she could've in weeks if she'd had to figure things out for herself.

And by the end of the day, Goody Hawkins knew some Algonquin, and the Indian woman, Namequa, knew some words in English. Namequa saw Goody Hawkins back to the little town and then faded into the trees almost like magic.

Well, the seasons came and went, and Goody Hawkins had her hands full trying to keep people well, what with the snakes and unfriendly Indians and poisonous plants all around. The folks couldn't get none of the plants they brought with 'em to grow very well, 'cause the weather was so different from England's. That mean that folks weren't eatin' right, and 'specially with the children that was bad. But Namequa showed Goody Hawkins plants that were good eating, and Goody Hawkins showed the other womenfolk, and for a time the folks there lived like Indians, what with the menfolk learnin' to hunt and fish from Squanto and the women learnin' to gather wild plants to eat from Goody Hawkins and Namequa.

That first thanksgiving feast, they didn't eat just the corn and squash and beans that Squanto showed the men how to grow, they also had roasted-seed mush and lamb's-quarters gathered by the women. All those, and the deer the neighboring Indians brought, well, that was some dinner!

Well, little by little, them folks got settled. Other ships came, with more people, and, later, with cows and other stock. And then Goody Hawkins was busier than ever, 'cause she was s'posed to take care of sick animals, too. Back then, if a cow didn't give milk, folks were apt to think the fairies had stolen the milk in the night, so 'twas only natural they should ask their wise woman for help.

Before long, there were babies, too, human and animal, and mothers needed Goody Hawkins' help to bring 'em into the world. Somehow, though, through all of this, Goody Hawkins kept time to visit with her good friend, and to keep learning, and to look into her silver bowl every now and again.

Well, the years went on, and ever'body got older, and some folks just died from getting old. Goody Hawkins' husband died too, and they hadn't any children, so Goody Hawkins should have been alone in the world. But she had her friend Namequa, and every little child in the town called her "Aunt Grace"-she wasn't their real aunt, you know, but they loved her like she was, 'cause she made them things, like sweet-scented pillows, and spicy cookies, and she always listened to them when they told her things. Goody Hawkins had learned a lot from Namequa's tribe, and now that she had no husband to take care of, she spent more time visiting with her Indian friends, and they learned from her too.

Indian magic is full of drums and dreaming. Goody Hawkins' magic was full of words and wishing. But she was careful not to let the rest of the folks know she was learnin' and teachin' magic. Why not? Well, folks don't like what they don't understand, is all. People were afraid of lots of things in them days, 'specially in a strange new place.

And as more o' them Puritan preachers come over from England, the folks would be more secret 'bout visiting Goody Hawkins, not wanting the preachers to know they was holding to the old ways. And the preachers, 'specially one Pastor Langford, looked sidewise and never straight on at Goody Hawkins, bein' afraid she might hex 'em or some such nonsense. Well, Pastor Langford thought she was workin' for the devil, but he didn't want to say it outright, 'cause folks liked her.

But even that was changing as Goody Hawkins spent more time with Namequa's tribe, and folk got to whispering about it. There was a number of men interested in marryin' to her, after her husband died, saying it wasn't right for a woman to live alone, but she didn't care 'bout any of 'em. She said no to all of 'em, and some of 'em went away mad. And folk got to saying things outright.

One lady said she seen Goody Hawkins dancing naked with all them Indians. Another said there was a demon keeping Goody Hawkins company, which was why she wasn't wanting to marry again. Somebody else said that it was that demon that killed Goody Hawkins' husband. All round town words buzzed like stinging wasps. Now, when a cow wasn't giving milk, it was Goody Hawkins, not the fairies, who they thought had stolen it. Folks began to keep their children away from her. And Pastor Langford came right out and made fiery sermons about witches and the devil and sin and punishment.

Goody Hawkins saw and heard all of this, but what could she do? It was her word against the words of respectable folk, and nobody was going to believe her. So she kept silent, kept to herself, and waited.

She didn't have to wait long. One evening, she came home from a visit to her Indian friends and found her cottage in ruins. Jars were smashed, boxes thrown all over. The herb-bunches had been torn down from the ceiling, her cauldron overturned, Bible verses scrawled all over the walls with charcoal from her fireplace. "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live", they said, and Goody Hawkins felt cold in her heart because she knew that the people wanted to kill her.

And worst of all, her beautiful silver bowl was all bent and crushed, like someone had hit it with a hammer. Goody Hawkins sat down at the table in the midst of the mess, and cried.

She felt helpless and angry. She wished she really could turn people into toads. She made half-hearted tries at cleaning up, but gave it up. Her heart burned with wanting to hurt the people who'd done it, and froze with knowing her life wasn't worth a straw to 'em.

My granny said, that in that hour the devil did come to her, offerin' to kill the townsfolk for her, if she'd give up her soul to him, but Goody Hawkins chased him out with her broom. I think more likely, she thought about putting poison in the well-water, but knew that not only would that poison the townsfolk, it'd poison the water and the earth,

and the water and earth hadn't hurt her. And she knew that killing all those folks would poison her soul, too, forever, make her sour and angry as a real wicked witch.

So instead, she gathered all her power to her, all her love and strength; she threw down her hiding bonnet, and shook out her hair, which was getting grey by now, and walked proud and tall out into the town square. The folks began to gather round, saying hateful things. But Goody Hawkins lifted up her arms and began to sing, strong and sweet, in the old tongue that nobody but wise folk could speak anymore. And when the folks saw that their words couldn't hurt her, they commenced to pick up stones to throw at her.

But before they could throw their stones, the preachers came and said she'd have to have a proper trial. So soldiers took Goody Hawkins away with them, away from the shouting people, and she was still singing as they locked her up.

They tried to get her to tell them things, like was she partners with the devil, and had she hexed people and animals, and did she have a demon helper, and did she change into a cat to steal milk, but she never did nothing but close her eyes and sing softly, smiling like she saw something beautiful. So finally they gave up and took her to the courthouse.

There all kinds of people told stories about Goody Hawkins and things she'd never really done. And all through it, Goody Hawkins stood tall, and looked straight in the faces of the folks as was doing the telling. When ever'one was through with their lyin', the judge asked Goody Hawkins had she anything to say.

Goody Hawkins looked round at the folks, looking like your momma when she's gonna scold you, and began tellin' each one what she'd done for them. This one wouldn't be alive if Goody Hawkins hadn't helped his mother with the birthing. That one's daughter was deathly sick with fever, and Goody Hawkins cured her. The other one's cows were dropping down dead before Goody Hawkins found out they were eating poisonous leaves. There wasn't one person in that courtroom Goody Hawkins hadn't helped somehow over the years. And folks were looking like you do when you're getting a scolding and you know you've been wrong.

But Pastor Langford butted in and said that Goody Hawkins must have led the cows to the poison leaves, she must have made the little girl sick, she must have put a hex on the mother so her baby had trouble being born. And even though some folks still looked uncertain, the rest of 'em started howling for Goody Hawkins to die, and that was that.

They took her out to the town square where there was a big oak tree, to hang her onto it. Some soldiers held the crowd back, while two of the others tied Goody Hawkins up, tied a rope around her neck, and threw the other end over one of the branches of the tree. Goody Hawkins wasn't scared to die, but she was scared of the pain, though she didn't let the people see that. She looked out at them and smiled, and was glad to see some people quit their shouting and look worried.

Pastor Langford come up, looking nervous, and said, "Do you wish to confess your sins? You may yet be forgiven and reach Heaven."

Goody Hawkins just smiled and said, "I have nothing to confess or be forgiven for, nothing I am ashamed of. I want no part of your heaven."

The preacher fairly threw a fit right there, choking and stuttering, he wanted so bad to cuss and swear at her but couldn't in front of the townsfolk. So he just pointed to the soldier holding the end of the rope, and he commenced to hauling on it.

Goody Hawkins felt the rope tighten and her ears started to ring, and she took what she was sure was her last breath. But suddenly there was a scream, and the rope went loose. Her head cleared, she looked around, and saw the soldier who'd been pulling her up holding onto his arm, where there was an arrow sticking out of it.

Folks was shouting and running all over the place, and Goody Hawkins saw that a whole tribe of Indians had come out of the woods like magic with bows and arrows and spears and all. The soldiers couldn't get a clear shot at none of the Indians, what with folks running round like ants when their hill gets kicked over. And in the middle of all that hollerin' and confusion, Goody Hawkins felt a sharp blade between her wrists, cutting the ropes that tied her.

There was two Indians there, a big young man and Goody Hawkins' friend Namequa who held a finger to her lips to shush her. The young man scooped Goody Hawkins up in his arms, and ran into the woods carrying her.

All of a sudden, the Indians disappeared like morning mist, and when the folks looked round, Goody Hawkins was gone too.

The folks never saw her again, and Namequa's tribe were never as friendly to them. Goody Hawkins' cottage was just left to fall down and rot, and nothing in it was ever touched. But some folks was sorry Goody Hawkins was gone, 'specially when they got sick, or their children or animals. And one day a mother whose little baby was sick as could be and nobody could help her, she went into the woods by herself, carrying an iron pot. She walked into a clearing, and waited, listening. The woods got quiet, like they were listening too, and the lady commenced to talking about the baby's problem and asking for help of whoever was listening.

She put the pot down, turned around, and walked out of the woods without looking back. The next day, she came back, and where she'd left the pot, there was a little bundle of herbs, wrapped up in a soft deerskin. She ran home with it, and made it into tea for her baby, and the baby got better.

Well, word of the cure got round among the womenfolk. Real quiet like, it got round, not like the lies 'bout Goody Hawkins had gotten round before. They kept it a secret from the preachers, and after a while the preachers forgot about Goody Hawkins.

And ever' once in a while, a woman would slip away from the town, out into the woods, carrying some small thing, that she thought Goody Hawkins might be able to use, knowing that Goody Hawkins was out there somewhere, and would hear them. And always there would be an herb packet there the next day, or a little charm, or some such.

As the years went by, the herb packets stopped appearing, but the woman who turned back would see a shaft of light fall on some plant, and would take of that back home with her. And finally, even that stopped, but somehow the help always came, somebody got better. There was a song, too. My granny's granny taught her this song, and my granny taught it to me, to sing to Goody Hawkins when we needed help:

With heavy heart I come and stand

The oak and bonny ivy,

A gift to offer in my hand.

The hazel, ash and bay tree.

How can I hope for any good

The oak and bonny ivy,

By standing in the empty wood?

The hazel, ash and bay tree.

But I will trust and dry my tears,

The oak and bonny ivy,

And know that the Wise Goodwife hears.

The hazel, ash, and bay tree.

Tsk! Asleep already. Good.

"Child, what are you doing out of bed?"

"I feel better, gramma!"

"Let me feel of your forehead. Well, that's fine."

"Gramma, can I have my coat?"

"Where are you going, child?"

"Out to the woods, gramma."

"What's that you have there?"

"It's a picture, gramma, look."

"Well, that's right nice. I think I can guess who that is. And I see you've given her back her silver bowl! She'll be happy. Off you go, then."

"Bye, gramma. I'll come back soon."

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